

PHOTOGRAPHY

FAQ

Q How important is the screen size on a digital camera?

A Optical viewfinders are almost extinct on compact digital cameras, so the LCD screen is often the only means of composing your shot. The screens on modern cameras vary from 2in to 3½in, and even many entry-level cameras have 2½in screens. A larger screen can make using the camera more pleasurable, particularly for viewing photos stored on its memory card. However, the resolution is just as important, particularly for adjusting manual focus or viewing menu information. Cheaper cameras often have screens with resolutions of around 115,000 pixels, while better ones have 200,000 or more pixels. Few screens offer more than 230,000 pixels, although Sony's recently announced DSC-G1, with its 3½in, 921,000-pixel screen, is a notable exception.

Ben Pitt

Music and photography expert

ben@computershopper.co.uk

CANON Digital Ixus 75

★★★★

£187 inc VAT

Canon's Ixus range is synonymous with stylish design, and while the front of the Ixus 75 is typically sleek, things get more interesting around the back. The 3in, 230,000-pixel screen dominates. When switched off it looks much darker than most screens, which helps to give excellent contrast when it's switched on. The five-way navigation pad has a novel feature: pushing it gently shows an animated preview of what would happen if you were to push it fully. It's pretty pointless, as the pad is clearly labelled with the same information, but it adds some pizzazz to proceedings. The straightforward controls and menus are typical of Canon, and it's good to see that ISO has its own button, showing that Canon recognises how important a feature it is, even on a point-and-shoot camera. The body is smooth with little to grip on to, so one-handed shooting isn't advisable.

Canon's latest Digic III processor delivers impressive performance. The camera took 1.5 seconds to switch on and capture a picture, and 1.9 seconds between subsequent shots. The 1.6fps continuous mode is impressive at this price, and best of all is the auto-focus, which locked on to subjects in around half a second, even in low light at telephoto zoom settings. Flash recharge times are slow, though, at around four seconds. Battery life is disappointing, too, no doubt partly because of the power-zapping big screen.

The Digic III processor also provides face detection to help with focus and exposure. This is switched on by default, and we found it fast and accurate at tracking faces. The resulting photos were superbly exposed, and the camera coped well with



difficult lighting to give attractive portraits. It passed other colour tests with distinction, producing flattering skin tones under artificial and flash lighting and capturing subtle shades of foliage accurately.

Detail was a little disappointing, falling short of the standard set by Canon's PowerShot A630 (see 'Also Consider...', below), although the difference was subtle in outdoor shots. Our biggest concern was the amount of noise in pictures. Shooting indoors without the flash, ISO 400 produced scruffy-looking results, while ISO 800 and 1600 proved unusable as the subject disappeared under a blizzard of noise. The Auto ISO mode seemed to be aware of the camera's limitations

and restricted ISO settings to 200 or lower, but this resulted in blur-inducing long shutter speeds in low light. Meanwhile, the Hi ISO setting used values from 80 to 800, but was too quick to jump to higher settings, increasing noise unnecessarily.

The level of noise in the Ixus 75's images is disappointing, but nevertheless most of its photos looked excellent. With fast performance and smart styling, it's an attractive package.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Huge screen
- ✓ Excellent colour accuracy
- ✗ Low-light pictures are noisy or blurry

DIGITAL CAMERA 7.1 megapixels (3,072x2,304), 3x optical zoom (35x105mm), SDHC slot (32MB card supplied), li-ion battery
PART CODE 1815B005AA
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.canon.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 58)

Battery life **271 shots**

Also consider...

FUJIFILM FinePix F20 Zoom

★★★★★

£100 inc VAT



The FinePix F20 Zoom is a classy

point-and-shoot camera that specialises in low-light photography. It produced excellent results at its ISO 400 setting, although shots were more varied at ISO 800 and above. Performance was also up to scratch, with just two seconds between shots. Most importantly, image quality was excellent, making this camera brilliant value.



DIGITAL CAMERA 6.1 megapixels (2,848x2,136), 3x optical zoom (35-108mm), xD slot (10MB internal), li-ion battery
PART CODE N0077830A
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.fujifilm.co.uk

- ✓ Superb image quality
- ✗ Varying quality at high ISO settings

FULL REVIEW Feb 2007

Battery life **432 shots**

CANON EOS 400D

★★★★★

£445 inc VAT

PRICE CUT!



The successor to the hugely popular EOS 350D, Canon's EOS 400D is the best affordable digital SLR camera on the market. Incredibly fast focusing, a high capture rate and brilliant image quality from the 10.1-megapixel sensor all make it really hard not to love this camera. For photography enthusiasts who want to upgrade from a film SLR or compact camera, this is undoubtedly the model to get.



DIGITAL CAMERA 10.1 megapixels (3,888x2,592), 3x optical zoom (18-55mm), CompactFlash slot, li-ion battery
PART CODE 1237 B009AA
SUPPLIER www.onestop-digital.com
DETAILS www.canon.co.uk

- ✓ Fantastic image quality
- ✗ Finite continuous mode

FULL REVIEW Feb 2007

Battery life **505 shots**

SAMSUNG Digimax S850

★★★★★

£100 inc VAT

When we first heard about the S850, we liked the sound of its 8-megapixel sensor, 5x optical zoom and manual exposure control, all for £150. As it arrived for review, its price fell to £100 from www.argos.co.uk (the Argos website calls it a Digimax 850). Can a camera this inexpensive really live up to its high specifications?

Samsung hasn't skimped on the other features, with a 2½in, 230,000-pixel screen, MPEG4 video capture at an impressive 800x592-pixel resolution and an SDHC slot for cards up to 4GB – it takes SD and MMC cards too. The one cost-saving measure is its AA battery compartment and disposable batteries supplied in the box. The plastic and metal body is larger than those of most compact cameras but feels tough and is comfortable to hold, although the door for the battery and card compartment seems a little flimsy.

As with previous Samsung cameras, the menus are arranged into three groups, which you access with different buttons. We used to find this confusing but we must admit that we're slowly getting used to it. They're logically grouped, with one button for general settings, another for frequently used camera controls such as ISO speed and white balance, and the third for effects such as Sepia or novelty picture borders. The mode dial includes Program, Aperture priority, Shutter

Priority and Manual exposure modes, plus something called Advanced Shake Reduction (ASR). This is a purely digital process rather than the optical image stabilisation used in other (admittedly more expensive) cameras. It requires quite a few seconds' processing time per picture, and we can't say definitively that it reduces blur from camera shake. Manual focus is available but there's no temporary digital zoom to help with fine adjustments. Manual exposure is better, as an Exposure Value (EV) display shows whether pictures are over- or underexposed, and half-pressing the shutter button gives an accurate preview of the brightness of the resulting image. Auto-bracketing is available, along with automatic shooting at one-minute or longer intervals and a Motion Capture option that shoots 30 1-megapixel images in a second.

The camera takes around three seconds to power up and shoot, which is slow, but otherwise performance is excellent. It captured a picture every two seconds in standard mode and every

1.5 seconds with manual focus. The 0.9fps continuous mode is less impressive, but it's perfectly adequate considering the price.

The S850's images looked every bit as good as we would expect from a camera costing twice as much. Detail was exceptionally sharp: pixel for pixel, images were crisper than those from the other cameras on test this month, and along with its

8-megapixel resolution, they were streets ahead. The 1cm macro focus produced stunning close-ups and the 5x zoom made a big difference for distant subjects. We did notice some chromatic aberration towards the corners, where the red, green and blue elements of images didn't line up, but it was imperceptible in most shots. Colours were vibrant and accurate, with flattering skin tones in direct sunlight, low artificial light and flash photography. Noise was impressively low, with sharp, reasonably clean pictures at ISO 400 and an ISO 1600 setting that was OK for emergencies. Sadly, low-light photography was spoiled by poorly chosen automatic settings. Auto ISO mode used ISO speeds as low as 50 in conjunction with shutter speeds up to 0.5s, which inevitably resulted in blur. With no high-sensitivity scene preset, the only solution was to set the ISO speed manually. This serious oversight rules out the S850 for casual snappers.

For those who take a keen interest in their camera's settings, the S850 is a fantastic bargain. Its image quality and photographic controls rival those of Canon's PowerShot A630 (below), while its 5x zoom and lower price make it all the more attractive. However, its automatic mode needs improvement before we can award it five stars.

Ben Pitt



SUMMARY

- ✓ Exceptional image quality
- ✓ Full photographic control
- ✗ Poor automatic low-light shots

DIGITAL CAMERA 8.1 megapixels (3,264x2,448), 5x optical zoom (38-190mm), SDHC slot (20MB internal), 2x AA batteries
PART CODE 5604298
SUPPLIER www.argos.co.uk
DETAILS www.samsungcamera.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 58)



PANASONIC Lumix DMC-FZ50

★★★★★

£282 inc VAT

PRICE CUT!



Panasonic's Lumix DMC-FZ50 gives almost digital SLR performance on a much lower budget. The huge 12x optical stabilised zoom lens and 10-megapixel CCD allow you to get close to the action. Image quality is excellent at low ISO settings, but ISO 400 or higher produces grainy images. It's the best super-zoom digital camera on the market.



DIGITAL CAMERA 10 megapixels (3,648x2,736), 12x optical zoom (35-420mm), SD slot (32MB card supplied), li-ion battery

PART CODE PANLUMFZ50
SUPPLIER www.ebuyer.com
DETAILS www.panasonic.co.uk

- ✓ Fantastic handling; beautiful pictures in well-lit conditions
- ✗ Image quality slumps as ISO setting rises

FULL REVIEW Jan 2007



FUJIFILM FinePix S6500fd Zoom

★★★★★

£180 inc VAT

PRICE CUT!



The S6500fd's zoom lens starts at 28mm for wide-angle photography, while a face-detection system helps you to focus and expose portraits of up to 10 people. High colour accuracy and detail make for excellent pictures, while low-light photography is excellent. This is an astounding camera for the price.



DIGITAL CAMERA 6.1 megapixels (2,848x2,136 pixels), 11x optical zoom, 10MB internal memory, xD slot, 4x AA (alkalines supplied) batteries

PART CODE N077950A
SUPPLIER www.jessops.com
DETAILS www.fujifilm.co.uk

- ✓ Fantastic image quality
- ✓ Very low noise at ISO 800

FULL REVIEW Mar 2007



CANON PowerShot A630

★★★★★

£150 inc VAT

Canon's PowerShot A630 is the first inexpensive camera we've seen to offer full photographic controls. It has a 4x zoom, 8-megapixel sensor and a full set of manual focus, exposure and priority modes.

The camera is easy to use, fast and has excellent image quality. The high quality and versatility are extraordinary at this price.



DIGITAL CAMERA 8.0 megapixels (3,264x2,448), 4x optical zoom (35-140mm), SDHC slot (16MB supplied), 4x AA batteries

PART CODE 12888007AA
SUPPLIER www.buyacamera.co.uk

- ✓ Excellent image quality; full manual control
- ✗ Bulky

FULL REVIEW Jun 2007



NIKON Coolpix S500

★★

£180 inc VAT



At 125g, the S500 is the smallest, lightest camera we've seen that includes optical image stabilisation to reduce blur from camera shake. Its controls and menus are easy to operate and the brushed aluminium finish, 2½in 230,000-pixel screen and five-way navigation pad that doubles as a wheel for adjusting settings give it a classy look.

Face recognition is built in to help expose and focus on faces, but it's slow and unreliable next to similar features on Canon and Fujifilm cameras. Performance in other areas is below average, too: the camera takes three seconds to switch on and shoot, and the same amount of time between shots. The continuous mode shoots in random bursts and averages only 0.5 frames per second (fps). Battery life is disappointing, too.

Image quality is the S500's weakest area. Detail was a little soft at the centre of pictures and deteriorated badly towards the corners. The macro mode needed 20cm between the camera and the subject before it could focus. Zooming in reduced this to 10cm, but

it's a shame this isn't better advertised. Colours were often excellent, but a significant number of photos looked undersaturated, and the automatic white balance mode handled artificial light poorly. The camera often used ISO 50 for outdoor photos, which is just as well because noise was visible at ISO 100. ISO 400 shots were passable but ISO 800

images were messy. The automatic exposure performed well, coping sensibly in low light. However, activating image stabilisation blocked access to almost every other setting and set the ISO speed to 1600, resulting in blur-free but blotchy, ugly photos.

For image stabilisation in a compact package, Panasonic's DMC-FX3 (*What's New, Shopper* May 2007) costs less and takes better pictures.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Smart, compact design
- ✗ Disappointing image quality
- ✗ Flawed image stabilisation mode

DIGITAL CAMERA 7.1 megapixels (3,072x2,304), 3x optical zoom (35-105mm), SD slot (26MB internal), li-ion battery
PART CODE VAA711B1
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.nikon.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 58)



PANASONIC Lumix DMC-TZ2

★★★★★

£222 inc VAT

BEST BUY Panasonic's TZ range is a superb concept: an ultra-zoom camera that looks like a compact camera. Their 10x zoom lenses unleash tremendous creative potential compared with 3x zooms, while their compact designs mean they'll slip into a pocket or handbag.

The TZ2 updates the TZ1 (*Labs, Shopper* March 2007) with a higher resolution and a focal length of 28-280mm rather than 35-350mm (35mm equivalents). A wide-angle lens is just as useful as an ultra-zoom lens, and the TZ2 has both. Otherwise, the design and 2.5in, 207,000-pixel screen follow those of its predecessor.

Performance is excellent at around 1.6 seconds between shots, and the straightforward buttons and menus ensure swift operation. The lack of manual exposure and focus is disappointing, although Panasonic's Intelligent ISO feature is included. This lets you set a maximum ISO speed – 400, 800 or 1250 – and the camera sets the speed for each picture depending not just on the available light, but also on how much movement it detects. Along with optical



image stabilisation, this feature is highly effective at preventing blur from camera shake.

Detail from the 5-megapixel TZ1 was disappointing, but the TZ2 is much improved in this respect. Meanwhile, it was unfazed by tricky lighting, taking attractive, punchy pictures across our tests. Noise – and Panasonic's infamous noise reduction artefacts – were not intrusive at ISO 400, although its maximum aperture of f/3.3

meant that higher ISO settings were needed more often than on cameras with f/2.8 apertures.

For the most part the TZ2 is an unremarkable, rather expensive camera, but we can't stress enough how much a large zoom range can improve the quality of photos. It wins a Best Buy award because this fact alone makes it the best travelling companion we've seen.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Big zoom in a compact camera
- ✓ Fast performance
- ✗ No manual controls

DIGITAL CAMERA 6 megapixels (2,816x2,112), 10x optical zoom (28-280mm), SDHC slot (13MB internal), li-ion battery
PART CODE DMC-TZ2EB-S
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.panasonic.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 58)



CHOOSING A... Digital SLR Camera

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

RESOLUTION: 6 megapixels
SUPPLIED LENS: 18-55mm, f/3.5-f/5.6
MONITORING: 2½in, 215,000-pixel LCD screen
CONTINUOUS SHOOTING: 2½fps
SUPPLIED MEMORY: None
Recommended minimum in grey

1 A digital SLR camera with the specifications shown above will cost around £400 and suit photography enthusiasts on a budget. Despite being an entry-level digital SLR, image quality will be in a different league to all but the best fixed-lens cameras, particularly when it comes to smooth, sharp detail with minimal image noise.

2 Spend more and you'll get a camera with a higher resolution. Ten megapixels is common even for some entry-level models. This gives finer detail, although the difference isn't as great as the figures might suggest.

3 The kit lenses supplied with budget digital SLRs can take excellent pictures, but their zoom ranges and macro-focus capabilities are limited. If you're interested in telephoto photography, consider buying a second lens, perhaps with a 70-200mm focal length. Alternatively, buy a body-only camera and an 18-200mm or similar lens. Aperture values tell you how much light the lens can capture at either end of its zoom range; the lower the f-number, the brighter the lens.

4 A 2½in, 200,000-pixel screen is standard among digital SLRs, but you'll be using the optical viewfinder to compose shots. Its through-the-lens (TTL) view shows exactly what is captured by the camera's sensor and makes manual focusing easy. A second, passive LCD screen is useful for displaying camera settings.

5 Most affordable SLRs outperform even the fastest compact cameras. However, look out for a fast continuous mode, autofocus and shutter lag if quick-fire photography is a priority.

6 Digital SLRs usually don't come with any storage, so budget around £30 for a fast (at least 60x) 1GB CompactFlash or SD card to ensure that it doesn't create a performance bottleneck.